

SLIPPED CABLES

Drawings by George Wright

BY S. TEN EYCK BOURKE AND CHARLES FRANCIS BOURKE

'E slipped his cable
An' 'e went out to sea—
All on account of Eliza!

IT sure is tough luck," said Surtman Johnson, as he leaned back from his labors of painting the Ships Bottom power-boat, only to catch himself falling into song that lowered his spirits even more than work. "It sure is tough luck, w'en a fellow's got to welsh on the neatest little hooker in Barnegat village. On'y what's he going to do when he's broke, and the bullies are broke, and a bloomin' beachcomber stands knocking at the door, willing and anxious to cut him out with his girl, and it's blowing too hard to run away to sea, anyway? Gee! but it's mighty lonesome bein' poor and honest!"

Johnson's logic was mixed, like his mental outlook; but a man has a right to be pessimistic at times, and Long Johnson, Surtman No. 1 of Ships Bottom Life Saving Station on Barnegat beach (and for the time being acting as substitute keeper of the crew in the absence of Big Jim Casco, the Captain of record), had just realized that he was the victim of an entirely new and original combination of trouble, to wit, love and the lack of lucre.

Ordinarily, impecuniosity would not have disturbed the surtman's philosophical calm; to be broke was Johnson's chronic condition. But the present situation threatened him with disaster as final as that which had befallen the tramp steamship *Brazilian*, with coffee out of Rio, when she skinned out of the storm the preceding night to break her back on the submerged rocks of Gridiron Reef, off the station, and make a giant brew of forty-two thousand sacks of Best Domestic Mixed—unless the wrecking tugs hurried up to take a hand in the salvage.

But just now Johnson had a very particular reason for needing money,—a very pretty reason, by name Miss Molly Elliot, who, besides dancing eyes and tantalizing dimples, possessed a birthday—just three days off, he realized with a groan—which the prodigal lover had promised to celebrate, in part, by a jaunt to Atlantic City. And Miss Molly was not in the habit of meeting with disappointments—not with Harry Morton running a close second for her favor. Young Morton was the "beachcomber" of Johnson's soliloquy, and a partner in a prosperous wrecking company over in Barnegat village across the bay, while the long surtman had only his scanty Government pay—and that three weeks away, and hypothecated!

Overnight, when Johnson confided his dilemma to his mates, the big men, eagerly grasping the opportunity to enlighten the victim in the difficult and devious paths of courtship, with a view to adding to his misery, had also added to his knowledge—and his hatred—of his rival.

"In this here sparkin' you got to give 'em presents f'r birthdays,—watches with blue faces an' bow pins," Yankee Evans explained to the neophyte, with cheerful disregard of the ethics of convention; "sides payin' 'demnity every week, taking 'em to theaters an' out-ings an' such. Takes a rich wrecker like Harry Morton to rush the girls," Evans added with a grin.

"I heard Morton skipped out f'r 'York in a hurry; 'long of some trouble his wreckin' company's got in, so old man Bright said. But mebbe 'twas on'y to buy birthday presents," supplemented Little Welsh, the gun-firer of the crew, helping the good work along. "Anyhow, that won't help Johnny out. Wat with payday three weeks off, an' Harry Morton still in the running—Well, it looks to me like our Johnny's due to hit the rocks. He'll have company in them coasters in this howler. 'Ear 'er blow!"

LONG JOHNSON'S brother surtmen were still snoring in their bunks in the little white-painted life barracks; but worry over his brooding troubles had routed him from his bed in the gray dawn, and he had betaken himself to white-leading the scarred strakes of the big white motorboat, battered by the terrible flailing Old Ocean had given the life crew in the take-off work from the wrecked *Brazilian* the night before.

Welsh's forecast of elemental disaster recurred to the disconsolate life saver with a gleam of comfort in the morning solitude of the boathouse. "Mebbe if she blows up hard it'll let me out on that Atlantic trip," he soliloquized shamelessly. "There wouldn't no money take me to sea, 'less I got to go!"

He dug down into the pocket of his tarry breeches and brought up a huge silver watch which he studied moodily, with the vague thought of hypothecating it, on the theory that every little helped. Shoving it back into his pocket with a sigh, he looked long and yearningly at the wrecked coffee tramp on the Gridiron.

Time, place, and condition all rendered a poverty-stricken lover susceptible to temptation; and the presence of that wasted wealth prepared Johnson's mind for



"Well, What Do You Know About That?"

the wiles of the serpent—who had already appeared on the horizon.

"Times a man's most tempted to loot ships himself, things get that desperate. Wonder what kind o' mixup Harry Morton's been getting in? He's took to confiding in Miss Molly continual o' late. I thought he was sparkin' old Bright's girl, till he got to callin' on Molly, and—"

AN eager hail interrupted his gloomy meditation. A burly young fellow, red capped and pea-jacketed after the approved fashion of the wrecking beach, swung round the corner of the boathouse, boring into the wind, his keen eyes searching for someone—and that one obviously Johnson. The life saver's greeting was not cordial.

"You, Harry Morton! You come back from 'York to see what chance you an' your partner's got with that coffee tramp? You can haul off: old man Bright's goin' to salvage her. He's cut you out, like you—"

Morton shook his head impatiently. Satisfied, after a swift glance round, that they were alone, he gripped the surtman's arm and spoke with an eagerness that surprised even Long Johnson from his calm indifference.

"I got a job for you, Johnson. You're out for the dough, I s'pose? It isn't going to hurt anybody either: private business of my own. There's a hundred in it for you too."

Long Johnson started. What Providence was coming to his aid in the form of his hated rival, the wrecker? He thought of the trip to Atlantic City and the "scrump-tious" blue watch, both made possible by that great sum Morton offered. A hundred dollars—two months' pay! Harry Morton wasn't such a bad chap, only—

"It's just to run out the lifeboat tonight, Johnson, and take a passenger off the old Cornwall—transatlantic liner, Boston to N'Orleans. Passes here 'long about eight o'clock, you know. That's all I want you to do. It means a lot to us—to me, Johnny!" No question about Morton's eagerness now; the young fellow was fairly shaking with emotion.

Johnson suddenly remembered Welsh's remark of the trouble the wrecking company was in, and the business that had taken Morton, one of the partners, to New York. His hopes of legitimate gain, raised so unexpectedly, dropped with a crash.

"O' course, sure!" The life saver's tone was sharp with disappointment as well as sarcasm. "Course you got a order from Washin'ton, if it's all right and proper? Nothin' short of a order takes Ships Bottom's boat out tonight—or a rocket at sea!"

Morton checked an angry cry. "Order—the devil! There isn't time. Besides, it's Saturday. Anyway, it's private business, like I said, Johnny. The passenger took ship at Boston by mistake. I just got word of it, and there's something important just come up. I can't get word out by wireless: I couldn't get him off with my launch, not with the sea that's making," he finished lamely.

Long Johnson laughed unpleasantly. Instant sus-

picion of crooked work flashed into his mind. Surtmen and wreckers are never the best of friends professionally. Probably the other partner of the wrecking firm had skipped to avoid the crash, and the authorities had got wind of it. Of course Morton wanted to get him off before the ship reached port! He saw his chance here, since the old Cornwall, as he said, carried no wireless equipment.

Instinctively Johnson had sensed something more than a mere transshipment at sea underlying his rival's proposal—a man who scarcely spoke to him when they met at Molly's house. Now, when he thought of it, he remembered Molly was confused the last time too. They had been talking this over. There was an understanding between the two, eh? Molly didn't want Morton to risk it. She didn't mind *him*! Maybe she'd sent Morton to him!

"Nothin' short o' that Rev'nue order goes—or a rocket," he repeated shortly. "If you're so anxious to join your partner, why don't you get aboard the ship and go along with him?" he asked bluntly. "Why don't you skip together?"

Morton looked startled. Then he smiled grimly, dapping the surtman on the shoulder. "I see you been doing some guessing yourself, Johnny," he said. "I did think of that; but I spoke to Miss— You see, it wouldn't be just the right thing. We'd better face it out right here at home," the young fellow said, flushing under Johnson's stern gaze. "Anyway, the steamer will stop only for you—for you or a Revenue," he added significantly. "And the cutters are all down south. Look here, Johnson—s'pose there was a distress signal out there tonight before the Cornwall was due to pass here? You'd have to take the boat out, wouldn't you?"

The question was practically a threat, and Johnson's jaw tightened. He did not dream of deceiving himself by asking for an explanation, what the man intended to do. He knew Morton's reputation for gaming his point. He was a man to take long chances on anything. The life saver understood, or he thought he did. The thing that cut him to the heart was that Molly—his Molly—knew all about his rival's crookedness and was willing to stand by him. Now, if only he was sure they'd both skip when they got ashore—if that was what Molly wanted—Besides, that would leave him a clear field with her—he hated to be beaten!

Johnson was sparring with his conscience. His eyes wandered to the open door leading from the boathouse into the adjoining station. The subdued rumble of voices, the thump of a dropped boot, and the stamping of feet as the life savers tumbled out of their bunks, making ready for the day's routine,—all the familiar sounds, mingled with the clatter of breakfast dishes, drifted out to him. The bullies would risk anything he proposed!

Morton was quick to seize his instant of wavering. He thrust an official looking packet hastily into his hand. "If that steamer won't stop for me, Johnson, leave those papers aboard for the Captain," he urged per-